The Invention of Heterosexual Culture, by Louis-Georges Tin

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BOOK REVIEW


This is an important work that documents and elucidates a profound ongoing conflict through Western culture over the last 800 or more years. It has to do with the subjective orientation of our personal lives in regard to sex and companionship. In other words, our expectations, aspirations, and the value we place on relations with the opposite sex as well as with the same sex. Tin’s principal focus is France and, tangentially, England, but the book applies to all Western societies with a Christian heritage, because we are all heirs to these developments. Tin has done an outstanding job of making plain the continuity between our basic preconceptions and assumptions about interpersonal relations and sex and longstanding struggles within Western culture whose deep roots extend back to the Middle Ages. It has special relevance to contemporary philosophical and social conflicts that we contend with in our political and legal sphere and that impinge on us in our daily lives.

**What is heterosexual culture?**

Heterosexual culture—as opposed to heterosexuality—is a cultural and psychological construct that has a history and an evolution and whose character is shaped by social and political forces that are ongoing. What is the difference between heterosexuality and heterosexual culture? Heterosexuality is the sexual attraction between men and women, the ability of men and women to interact sexually and produce offspring. This is obviously a constant in human behavior without which humanity would cease to exist. Heterosexual culture, on the other hand, is how this capability and these interactions are regarded collectively within a society, how they are structured and maintained socially: the social norms and institutional structures in which these interactions take place and by which they acquire their meaning and significance. This is not constant by any means. It is highly variable and changes and evolves in response to myriad internal and external forces within the society:

while heterosexual practices might have been widespread, heterosexual cultures were not. To put it another way, the celebration of love between men and women was not a constant of premodern human society. (p. 161)

What Tin means by heterosexual culture is the high regard in which heterosexual relationships are held by most people in society—the importance they give to heterosexual relationships in their personal lives, the focus and emphasis they place on interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex. It is not enough that there is an assumption that adult males and females will marry and produce children. The existence of heterosexuality, or even its prevalence, does not amount to a heterosexual culture. Heterosexual culture means that a shared ideal and aspiration prevails in society that people will structure their lives around relationships with the opposite sex, that these relationships will be the emotional, social, sexual, and economic mainstay of their lives, and, very importantly, that they will bring fulfillment and that people will find satisfaction in this style of living.
Sexual culture in the ancient world

The major point of Tin’s book is that this preeminence of heterosexuality in structuring the lives of ordinary citizens has not always been the case in Western societies. In fact, Tin points out that the much older legacy of Western culture is what he calls “homo-social,” wherein same-sex relationships are the predominant form of social bonding and societies were structured around segregation of the sexes with heterosexual interactions minimized and also devalued, if not despised. This pattern is the norm for warrior cultures where men, from an early age, are trained and acculturated for fighting in combat. Close male bonding is the norm. Early male-male sexualization is the norm. Females are seen as a distraction and a dangerous softening of this hard masculine ideal. The value of women lies in their ability to produce (especially male) children and to maintain a congenial domestic environment. Women are not seen as daily companions for men, and sex with women is seen as inferior to sex with other men. This is the traditional, much older cultural norm in Western societies (and probably worldwide as well):

First, feudal society was homosocial. Women were held to be of little account and, accordingly, relegated to a peripheral role, not least since they were not considered capable of arousing or experiencing deep-seated emotions.

Second, these male amours were inextricably bound up with the essentially global and holistic nature of medieval society. In today’s highly individualistic society, such friendships tend to be predominantly of a private nature. This was not so in the medieval world, where friendships were frequently both private and public at the same time and, moreover, socially accepted and endorsed.

Third, the romance illustrates the feudal character of love between males to the extent that it is frequently governed by hierarchical considerations … promoting stability and social cohesion often presupposed the formal encouragement of a spirit of comradeship … There is a direct correlation between male friendship and allegiance to one’s sovereign… . Charlemagne’s own authority and power are effectively bolstered by the friendship between his lieutenants and their willingness to fight to the last to be worthy of each other’s and their emperor’s love.

The fourth—that the emotional attachments described were intense and no less genuine for having been imposed by royal command. They represented rare pockets of tenderness and love in a world that was otherwise unremittingly brutish…. A pair of lovers would hug and kiss (frequently on the lips) and often spend the night in one another’s arms. Their sexual orientation was not relevant since everything they did appeared normal and natural in the eyes of their peers and contemporaries. (Tin, pp. 13–15)

Homosocial culture was very consistent with the values that became established in the Christian Church. From Paul onward, Christian sexual norms advocated sexual asceticism, especially in regard to heterosexual interaction, segregated seating of the sexes in church, eventually the veiling of women, and the exclusive dominance of males in clerical roles (Brown, 1988; Ranke-Heinemann, 1990; Treggiari, 1991):

passionate, sexual love largely disappeared from Latin belles lettres—in which it had hitherto been a major subject—throughout the more than half millennium from about 400 to about 1000 of the Christian Era, as literature fell largely into the hands of ascetic leaders of the new religion. (Boswell, 1994, p. 109)
However, Boswell added,

This is not necessarily an indication that the majority of the population became less interested in erotic fulfillment than they had been previously; in fact, little is known of the feelings of ordinary people in any premodern society. (Boswell, 1994, pp. 109–110)

The prevailing mindset and the institutional structure of society during the Middle Ages was dominated by these severe ascetics representing the Christian faith. Homosocial bonding predominated, sexual relationships with women were deemphasized or eschewed as much as possible, and relationships between men as well as between men and boys were expected and seen as natural. Boswell cited a number of ancient authors, including Aristotle, Plutarch, and Hesiod, who recommended about a generation in age difference as the ideal for both heterosexual and homosexual lovers (Boswell, 1994).

This all began to deliquesce at some time in the 12th century and to give way to an ascending heterosexual resurgence, at least among the aristocracy. Tin documents but does not explain how, after this long era of hegemony, the Church began losing its grip on the sexual culture within the nobility. As Tin describes it, heterosexual culture appeared and spread among the European elite starting in the 12th century. He does not offer any analysis or insight into the dynamics taking place in medieval society that was fueling this transition. It is a major limitation of this book and has left me intensely curious. He provides no context that would have opened up such a possibility. It seems a rather puzzling phenomenon. I would speculate that it had something to do with the Crusades and the movements and mixing of peoples that occurred as a result of those campaigns. But it is probably also true that it was quietly percolating all along, but subdued and overshadowed by Christian asceticism on the one hand and the prevailing homosocial order on the other.

Susan Treggiari’s monumental work, Roman Marriage, is a distillation of a vast sweep of philosophical thinking on marriage from Greco-Roman times as well as legal and social practices. Her work illustrated the continuity between the modern conception of marriage, the ideals underlying it, especially in regard to the behavior and role of women, and the thinking of ancient jurists and philosophers. She pointed out with many examples that the asceticism of the Christian conception of marriage and the stress on monogamy have ample precedent in the ancient world. She produced numerous examples of good marriages that existed in ancient Rome, which shows that some couples had satisfying, balanced, affectionate, constructive partnerships. This led her to conclude:

Rome’s particular (though not entirely original) contribution to the ideology of marriage was the ideal of the wife’s faithfulness to one man, the eternity of the bond, and the partnership of the couple. Subordination of the wife, I would argue, was not essential or important by the time of Cicero. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 261)

Her construal is, in my view, a little misleading because she deemphasizes the homosocial character of ancient society, allowing one to project a prevalent heterosexual culture characterized by nuclear families and romantic love between males and females. It allows one to think that this was the prevalent cultural trend in ancient Rome, but it most assuredly was not.

For example, she asserted:

It has been demonstrated in recent work that the Romans regarded the “nuclear family” as central to their experience. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 410)
She then went on to present pages of well-documented evidence that contradict this statement. For example, she quoted a passage from Cicero longing for his absent friend, Atticus, that clearly indicates that his male friend is the most important emotional bond in his life.

Where are you now? You have so often lightened the pain and anxiety of my heart by talking to me and counselling me. You have been my ally in public matters and my confidant in all my private affairs and have shared in all my talk and plans. But now where are you? I am so abandoned by everyone that the only relaxation I have is the time I spend with my wife and darling daughter and sweet little Cicero. For those ambitious and artificial friendships give prestige in public life but bring no profit at home. So when my house is well filled in this morning, when I go down to the forum packed in the midst of a flock of friends, I can’t find anyone in that great throng with whom I can joke casually or risk a sigh. (Cicero, quoted in Treggiari, 1991, p. 416)

Treggiari interpreted this passage thus:

Cicero leaves the precise point about conversation and counsel and begins to move towards the lack of people with whom he can relax. He can only relax with his family. This remark seems to stress what is most important to him at this moment, the ease and naturalness of being in the family group. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 417)

However, the whole passage that she quoted from Cicero plainly illustrates that Cicero’s relationship to Atticus is the emotional and psychological mainstay of his life. His family serves as consolation, but its role is clearly secondary. He does not even refer to his wife by name. The letter is pining away for Atticus. Yet Treggiari’s need to perceive the family as the emotional center of a man’s life is so ingrained that it caused her to distort the evidence before her and to impose an interpretation that results in her missing the elephant in the room, namely, that the ancient world was a homosocial culture—that male bonding had greater emotional and psychological significance for the majority of men than their wives. This is also consistent with the many other observations she makes about attitudes toward women and their place in society.

Marriage alone can provide a man with legitimate children, his family with posterity, and the state with free-born and legitimate citizens. But children are not an unmixed blessing: they may be bad—in which case they are undesirable—or good—in which case we worry about what will happen to them. A good wife is also a blessing, but they are few compared with bad wives, who are expensive to support and nag their husbands. Rich wives, the epiklēroi of Greek comedy and the well-dowered wives (dotatae) of Roman, attempt to dominate their husbands. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 184)

Treggiari cataloged a wealth of evidence for the predominance of homosociality in ancient Rome, yet she seems to see it as a heterosexual culture:

Although the Greek and especially Athenian practice of secluding their women may well appear to have been more thorough-going and more strictly sanctioned by morality than anything current in Rome at any period, it will be worth keeping in mind the common Mediterranean idea that a woman’s place is in the home. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 203)

It should also be kept in mind that during the Roman Empire period, which is the timeframe covered by Treggiari’s book, between 30% and 40% of the population were slaves. Under Roman law, slaves could not marry (Treggiari, 1991, p. 43), so at least one third of the population was excluded from the concept of “nuclear family” by virtue of their enslaved condition. Furthermore, the typical Roman family, at least in the affluent classes, consisted of husband, wife, children, and slaves. This created a very different
family structure and atmosphere from our modern concept of “nuclear family.” In fairness to her, however, *Roman Marriage* appeared 3 years before Boswell’s work on same-sex unions in premodern Europe. Having been acculturated in our modern heterosexual-dominated world, she was probably conditioned to discount or minimize the same-sex evidence that was before her.

Treggiari pointed out that marriage was a social necessity in the ancient world, an obligation—an inevitability perhaps. But it was not widely regarded as glamorous. Heterosexual culture refers to how marriage is regarded, the expectations surrounding it, and its emotional and psychological significance for people. Heterosexual culture exalts the love relation between man and woman and tends to see marriage as the culmination or object of that relationship. Think of the Beach Boys song “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” from 1966:

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Happy times together we’ve been spending
I wish that every kiss was neverending
Wouldn’t it be nice
Maybe if we think and wish and hope and pray it might come true
Baby then there wouldn’t be a single thing we couldn’t do
We could be married
And then we’d be happy
Wouldn’t it be nice (Wilson, Asher, & Love, 1966)
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This is paradigmatic heterosexual culture. The Romans were not singing this. “Happily ever after” is not a Greek or Roman idea. There was plenty of heterosexuality going on, to be sure, and men often pursued women with great fervor and enthusiasm, but the attitudes and expectations of those relations were very different from what modern people brought up in a hegemony of heterosexuality understand. Ancient cultures were more flexible and tolerant of the sexual tastes of individuals than we are today. Ancient life was more public. There was less of a dichotomy between public and private spheres than has become common today.

The point of this discussion is to illustrate that the assumption of heterosexual culture is so deeply established in the thinking of modern people that even scholars of such formidable stature as Treggiari, whose command of ancient literature and lifestyles is nothing less than awe-inspiring, still remain inclined to look at the ancient world and see “nuclear families” and heterosexual culture. This, I think, is a misunderstanding and a distortion of the evidence that she herself assembles, and I agree with Tin that ancient Mediterranean societies were predominantly homosocial and homoerotic. This is the value of Tin’s book. It awakens awareness to this massive shift that has taken place in the Western mindset toward relations between the sexes beginning in the late Middle Ages.

Niall Rudd offered an extensive and able study of romantic love in antiquity illustrated with many examples, but Rudd came to a more balanced conclusion that there was ample enthusiasm for heterosexual relationships in the ancient world despite the prevalence of homosocial attitudes.

To sum up, romantic love was not unknown in antiquity; it was not confined to homosexual relationships; nor was it exclusive to couples who would not or could not marry. Granted, it did not represent the prevailing social ethos, as it did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was commonly mocked, denigrated, and feared. Yet was undeniably there; and it was always assumed to be there until very recent times. (Rudd, 1981, p. 157)
The presence of romantic love and passionate heterosexual connection in antiquity—or at any time—should not be surprising. Men and women do enjoy having sex together—sometimes. But the prevailing social ethos was homoerotic. This is the point that Tin makes. It is not that heterosexuality did not exist in premodern societies or that some people did not prefer it and find satisfaction in it or even idealize it. The point is that the culture, the prevailing attitudes, values, and expectations, did not hold it in high regard and in many quarters were contemptuous of it. Ancient societies did not think in the dichotomies characterizing sex that we are trapped in today. We need to keep in mind that the word heterosexuality—and thus the concept—did not appear in the English language until the late 19th century (Tin, p. 157). In fact, heterosexual and homosexual are artificial constructions that have come into the language only a little over 100 years ago. They are not inherent qualities of people such as hair and eye color. As Christianity recedes and sexuality becomes looser and more flexible, the need to categorize people by who they have sex with will diminish, and we will be able to abandon these terms altogether.

Ancient people did not think in terms of categorizing people according to their choice of sexual partners. They were much more prone to categorize people according to the social class into which they were born. Sexuality was likely much more fluid for both males and females than it is in modern times. The harsh atmosphere of examination and persecution that exists in our modern era has distorted our sexuality and forced it into restrictive patterns that were unknown in former times. In a cultural milieu where sexuality is not rigidified it is probably more amenable to flux, and cultural trends in sexual preference are able to wax and wane and mix more freely. The heavy-handed suppression by Christian asceticism is what tends to confine sexuality into these fixed boxes, which can then be judged and disposed of. I suspect that romantic love and enthusiasm for heterosexual connection continued very much restrained and stifled through the Middle Ages until conditions changed that allowed it to emerge and flower as a popular phenomenon.

The emergence and widespread acceptance of heterosexuality made life difficult for warriors, caught as they were between the bellicose ethic of chivalry—a male preserve by definition—and the dictates of courtly society. They were between two worlds—one male, one female—and at the same time forced to respond to two contradictory imperatives, reconciling their own homosocial world with an emerging heterosexual culture. (Tin, p. 17)

**Heterosexual culture and marriage**

This shift toward heterosexual predominance was a cultural revolution that spread and grew in influence to the point where the Church felt it was necessary to take an unprecedented action in legitimizing and sanctifying marriage for Christian believers. The medieval Church—like the modern Church—realized that it was losing ground and that the tide of society, at least among the elite, was turning against its male-oriented ascetic values. In response, the Church brought marriage within its orbit by creating the sacrament of matrimony: monogamous heterosexual marriage.

The Church did not invent marriage, nor did it invent monogamy. When the Church sanctified marriage for Christian believers, it was attempting to narrow the scope of heterosexual interaction down to a single lifetime partner—an unprecedented formulation of marriage, at least for men. This was a much more severe and restrictive formulation of marriage than anything that had significance in the pre-Christian ancient world. Roman marriage was about maintaining social class boundaries and producing
legitimate children who could inherit property and assume the roles of citizenship in the Roman state (Boswell, 1994; Treggiari, 1991). It did not imply any restriction in the sex lives of males.

Walter Scheidel did a survey of anthropological literature and found that

until very recently, polygynous arrangements of marriage or cohabitation were the norm in world history, and strict monogamy remained an exception. Barely one in six of the 1,195 societies surveyed in the largest anthropological dataset have been classified as ‘monogamous’, while polygyny was frequently considered the preferred choice even if it failed to be common in practice. (Scheidel, 2009, p. 1)

It is worth underlining the fact that for the first 13 centuries of its existence the Christian Church did not recognize marriage as a sacrament, that is, as a union ordained by God. So after 13 centuries of disparaging and discouraging heterosexual marriage, the Church at last endorsed it, albeit with the most severe restrictions. This was an attempt on the part of the Church to subsume the rapidly spreading heterosexual culture under its ethical purview.

As of the start of the thirteenth century, the Church deemed it preferable to accept what it could not in practice totally prohibit: its pragmatic approach was to the effect that it was thought more advisable to accommodate than oppose. The upshot was that heterosexual love was gradually accorded the blessing of the Church, always on the condition that it would fall within ecclesiastical rules governing conjugal love. The holy sacrament of marriage was constituted during the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The Church was both acknowledging the heterosexual couple and tightening its grip on the culture of love, notably through the reinforced condemnation of adultery. (Tin, pp. 63–64)

The Church’s construal of marriage was that it should be desexualized except for procreation. From its earliest days “spiritual” marriage was the ideal put forward by the Christian Church for well over a millennium. (Boswell, 1994). Now it became official policy ordained by God. The Church’s elevation of heterosexual marriage did not endorse divorce, however—the inevitable shadow of heterosexual marriage. In Rome the possibility of divorce was acknowledged and written into the marriage contract (Treggiari, 1991). The prenuptial agreement was the rule in Roman society. Adultery (especially on the part of the wife) was always a ground for divorce, but it was rarely invoked. For the most part, the interest of Roman thinkers and lawgivers was in limiting bastard children that would result from adulterous relationships and the disruption they might cause in the disposition of property. The story is varied and interesting, but the Roman conception of monogamy is very different from the Christian conception of monogamy and has very different motivations. The Christian object was to restrict and limit sexual intercourse to a single partner throughout one’s lifetime, and only for procreation at that. The Romans were interested in social stability and domestic tranquility, which they felt was best served by monogamous marriages—and monogamy here applied to sex with other men’s wives.

Roman interest in promoting marriage and part of Augustus’s motivation in reforming the laws on marriage and the family were a need to prompt men in the upper classes to have more children (Treggiari, 1991). Departures from monogamy by wives entailed severe consequences, at least in theory. It did not necessarily apply to males having sex with concubines, prostitutes, slaves, or men. Different writers expressed different degrees of severity and conservatism in this regard. And no argument is made that any of these writings, recommendations, and laws in any way reflected the common practice of daily life.
It is possible to believe that the Roman upper classes of the late Republic were able to absorb and tolerate a degree of sexual licence for married women as well as married men. This is not to suggest that all wives claimed such licence. Adultery was rarely the formal grounds for divorce and was not very often alleged by outsiders as the underlying cause. The other most important effect which we would expect is bastards. But allegations that a certain lady's children were not her husband's are extremely rare. (Treggiari, 1991, p. 307)

Wives could be divorced for going out without having their heads covered, or for simply leaving the house without permission (Treggiari, 1991). Christian opposition to divorce was motivated by a desire to restrict sexual couplings and to repudiate a recognition of sex and love (as well as the absence thereof) as both a foundation for marriage and a reason for its dissolution. The Church’s construction of “spiritual” marriage takes sex and love out of the equation, and thus they are removed as either a rationale or justification for divorce.

Henry the Eighth of England broke with the Church and established the Church of England as a separate self-governing body in 1534 over this very issue. Henry had fallen in love with Anne Boleyn and wanted to free himself from his wife, Catherine of Aragon. Pope Clement VII refused to grant him a divorce, and this confrontation led to a major fissure within Christianity. There were political reasons and other factors at work as well, but heterosexual love was a major motivating force behind this blow to the authority of the Church (Tin, pp. 85–86).

Issues relating to heterosexual love have been eroding the authority of the Church over the lives of people ever since, and continue to do so in our own time. Tin discusses the marriage of priests at some length and contrasts Protestant thinking on this matter with the views of the traditional Church (Tin, pp. 86–90). Today in the United States, abortion and, to a lesser extent, contraception (the tide of which is going increasingly against the Church) continue to be contentious. Pornography and sex with minors are further issues in which the Church weighs in heavily and are a direct outgrowth of the struggle over heterosexual culture. Tin extensively documents this losing battle that the Church has been contending with for a very long time. Seen in the long view, the Church’s influence over laws and social institutions governing relations between the sexes, and very importantly over the minds and attitudes of the vast majority of people, has diminished ever so slowly and inexorably over the last eight centuries.

Tin does a good job of documenting the course of the changes and the various factions within the society that struggled over them. But there is no connection made to any other developments in the economy, technology, or politics that made this mental and attitudinal change feasible. Tin makes it look like a war of ideas and arguments, but it was clearly more than that. Something was going on that powered this, and the artistic and literary examples that Tin uses as his evidence for the changes must have had a wellspring beyond the mere taste of some artists and writers.

In his conclusion Tin admits the limitations of his own study. Since he is so self-conscious and straightforward about it, I will let him present them to you in his own words:

my research has focused primarily on France and, by extension, on French-language documents and literature, both because this is the area with which I am personally most familiar and because literature has for a long time played such a key role in our national culture. (Tin, p. 157)

my immediate concern is to demonstrate how the present-day predominance of heterosexual culture can be traced to official institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, the higher orders of the nobility, and, albeit to a lesser extent, the medical profession. (Tin, p. 159)
It need scarcely be added that the present study adopts an essentially androcentric, or male-oriented, perspective. (Tin, p. 159)

Readers will also note that I have based my findings on official or so-called elite culture, and the present study takes little account of what we generally refer to as popular (pop) culture. (Tin, p. 159)

He points out numerous avenues for further research and suggests that he may be contemplating further volumes on this topic, which I hope he carries out.

**Heterosexual culture and the arts**

The evidence that Tin uses to document the waxing trend of heterosexual culture in France is mainly literary: novels, songs, poetry, and drama. It was the arts—namely, poetry, novels, and theatrical performances—that were seen as the major mode of propagation of this nefarious cultural malaise that was seen as promoting license and eroding ecclesiastical authority.

In France of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the culture of courtly love was anything but dominant. In part, this was to be expected: the Hundred Years War was scarcely a propitious backdrop for frivolity. (Tin, p. 72)

However, by the 16th century,

At first, it was only to be heard in the humanist city of Lyons, but soon all of France seemed awash with love poetry. The groundswell of heterosexuality that the Church had somehow contrived to stem (or at least divert) was back with a vengeance. (Tin, p. 74)

The Church—both Catholic and Protestant, by this time—resisted and persecuted love poetry and the writers thereof and strove to co-opt it and subsume it into the service of promoting Christian values.

Like the Protestants, Catholics were at pains to revamp love poetry and, wherever possible, bring its leading exponents into their camp. (Tin, p. 81)

Referring to the Huguenot stance that characterized Geneva and much of southern France,

it was not a question of arriving at some sort of compromise between spiritual and heterosexual love. There was to be no such compromise: human love had to be renounced in favor of the love of God. That was the bottom line. (Tin, p. 77)

The seventeenth century saw the Roman Catholic Church still locked in battle against the steady advance of a heterosexual culture that was perceived to be progressively propagating license and eroding ecclesiastical authority. (Tin, p. 93)

Shakespeare, for example, writing in the late 16th century, is very much preoccupied with the encroachment and interplay between heterosexual passion and the inner workings of power among the social elite. Shakespeare was ambivalent and skeptical of heterosexual passion as he was about nearly everything. But in his major works where this issue is a central theme: *Romeo and Juliet, Anthony and Cleopatra, Troilus and Cressida,* and the poem *Venus and Adonis,* heterosexual passion does not fare well and leads to destruction both personal and social. *Troilus and Cressida* is a particularly caustic comment on heterosexual love as well as on the elevated esteem of women. *Troilus and Cressida* depicts the Trojan War, a military campaign that was fought over a woman, thus: “The ravished Helen, Menelaus’ queen, with wanton Paris sleeps—that’s
the quarrel” (Prologue). Shakespeare’s verdict on that enterprise is unambiguously scornful. Fighting a war over a woman, however violated, is an utter waste of men’s lives, blood, and energy. At the same time, the play also makes positive affirmation of homoerotic connections that I would construe as an assertion of their superiority to heterosexual bonds. I think Shakespeare liked the homoerotic cultures of the ancient world, and he also did not believe in heroes. He seems to be very much aware of the advance of heterosexual culture among the aristocracy, that is, the elevated esteem in which heterosexual love—and, by implication, women—are held, in contrast to the older homoerotic culture that was being supplanted, which held women in low regard and gave primacy to male-male bonds. Shakespeare, in my judgment, came down squarely on the side of homoeroticism. There is much more that can be said about Shakespeare and the concept of love, but this is a subject that deserves a treatment all to itself, and I will take leave of it for now.

The royal proclamation of 1559 (England) had prohibited stage plays from dealing with “either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the common weale” (Gibbons, 2006, Intro, pp. 1–2). However, this proclamation seems to have been used by the Elizabethean government to suppress religious enactments that promoted Catholicism (Montrose, 1996, p. 24f.). The Puritans advocated the death penalty for fornication, and for a short time capital punishment for incest and adultery was actually introduced (Gibbons, 2006, p. 2). This severe reaction against spreading heterosexuality and public art forms such as the theater are examples of the intensifying struggle on the part of governmental authorities and religious ideological conservatives to rein in the burgeoning expression of heterosexuality in both public and private life.

This conflict between the Church and artistic expression in relation to the concept of love between the sexes has continued without respite in Western culture down to the present day. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, rock and roll music overwhelmingly championed heterosexual love and was enormously popular. Love between men and women was exalted and prized and sought after in song after song. Many songs expressed disappointment and conflict in heterosexual relationships, but without repudiating heterosexual love altogether. There were a few dissenters that voiced a withdrawal from love relationships, but one never heard an advocacy of homoeroticism. Conservative religious groups have been at the forefront of attempts to suppress certain rock and roll songs and require various kinds of labels warning of objectionable content in the lyrics of certain songs and albums.

In the United States, from the very beginning, motion pictures that were shown in public theaters were subject to various censorship regimes promoted primarily by religious leaders. Jon Lewis, in Hollywood v Hard Core, provides a fascinating, detailed examination of the struggle over artistic expression, content, and censorship by religious groups that began almost from the inception of the film as a public medium (Lewis, 2000, Chapter 3). The so-called Hayes Code, after Will H. Hayes, a Presbyterian elder, included the following “don’ts” for studios in limiting subject matter in films between 1930 up until roughly 1968, when it was replaced by an alphabet rating system of the Motion Picture Association of America.

(1) Pointed profanity—by either title or lip—this includes the words “God,” “Lord,” “Jesus,” “Christ” (unless they be used reverently in connection with proper religious ceremonies), “hell,” “damn,” “Gawd,” and every other profane and vulgar expression however it may be spelled.

(2) Any licentious or suggestive nudity—in fact or in silhouette; and any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture.

(3) The illegal traffic of drugs
These debates uncannily echo Tin’s recounting of the arguments that were going on against love poetry throughout Renaissance Europe. The issue and the arguments have not changed very much.

Pornography is a more blatant challenge to the Church’s efforts to suppress the artistic expression of heterosexual (and homoerotic) culture. This battle is ongoing in our own time, and it is not necessary to summarize it here. But this has affected literature, film, theatrical performances, and photographic and artistic exhibits. The point of these contemporary examples is to emphasize the continuity between the many pages Tin devotes to discussing examples of French literature and authors who were persecuted or suppressed by the Church in the 14th through the 20th centuries and the suppression efforts we experience today. Tin connects these repressive efforts to the growth in popularity of heterosexual culture, that is, the elevated esteem of sexual relations between men and women among the vast majority of people within society. Artistic works from romantic novels to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to songs by the Beatles to pornography are disseminated to the public and represent sexual and/or romantic connection between men and women as something desirable and to be sought after. Their extreme popularity is seen as most threatening to the authority of the Church and is the impetus for strenuous opposition.

The role of the medical profession

The unlikely ally of the Church in the modern era has become the medical profession, which has enjoyed an explosive growth in influence and prestige over the last two centuries. The association between love and illness goes back to the Middle Ages. It had a religious origin, as Tin points out (p. 115), and the trend within medicine that tends to view sexual relations and love with suspicion and hostility has been aligned with religious thinking down to the present day. Tin does a very nice job of spelling out these connections. Medical attitude was not generally favorable toward heterosexual love. Love tended to be viewed as a pathological condition and was seen to give rise to numerous physical ailments. “Erotomania,” for example, has been described and disparaged by physicians from the 17th century onward to its modern incarnation of “sex addiction” (Tin, p. 131). Some things haven’t changed very much.

From about the 19th century forward medicine became increasingly skeptical of religion as it already was of heterosexual love. Physicians sought empirical and scientific explanations for diseases and treatments rather than “spiritual” remedies. And while modern medical science has liberated itself from the superstitions of religion in most disciplines, it continues to promote hostile religious attitudes toward sexuality and employs the condemnatory language of religion in such terms as “abusive,” “pathological,” “perverted,” “rape,” “molestation,” “exploitative,” and so
on to describe sexual relationships and activities that are not abusive, coercive, or even harmful in any way.

Medical opinion toward heterosexuality began to tilt toward a more favorable view in the latter part of the 19th century. This change in attitude was prompted by the emergence of women into professional careers and, in particular, medicine. Faced with the prospect of a substantial influx of female practitioners into the ranks of medicine, the medical profession began to see the advantages of heterosexual marriage and love as the socially appropriate domain of women. As Tin puts it, “love was an opiate for women” (Tin, p. 137):

The belief that heterosexual love was the most natural thing in the world was accorded widespread acceptance and approval as the twentieth century progressed. (Tin, p. 137)

Tin points out that Freud, for one, saw the exclusive sexual interest in members of the opposite sex as psychologically problematic and questionable as the exclusive interest in members of the same sex, and that both were the result of a long process of psychic development:

Thus from the point of view of psychoanalysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem that needs elucidating and is not a self-evident fact based on attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature. (Freud, 1905, p. 146n)

However, Freud’s attitude did not take root among the broad public, or even within the medical profession. Rather, with heterosexuality seen to be “natural,” everything that did not conform to this “natural” tendency was seen as somehow “pathological” or “perverse.” Throughout the 20th century there has been an endless search for the “cause” of homosexuality, as if it were some sort of disease or deformity. But no such investigation has been undertaken to diagnose or explain heterosexuality. The reason for this is the leading role assumed by the medical profession and psychiatry in the promotion of heterosexual culture. Homosexuality was pathologized, and therapies were devised to try to “convert” or “cure” it:

the terminology may have been distinctly less technical, but the underlying aim of protecting the young was couched in a sort of scientific vulgate that, for all its rational, secular, and republican overtones, was never all that different from the Christian moralizing it was intended to replace. (Tin, p. 145)

Unfortunately, as psychoanalysis became co-opted by the medical profession, particularly in the United States, homosexuality became increasingly pathologized, and exclusive heterosexuality came to be posited as the “norm,” toward which the sexual development of children should be directed and by which it is judged. Despite the fact that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the DSM-II in 1973, psychoanalysis continued to view homosexuality as a pathological condition that was the result of “fixated” development on the one hand, or “regression” to earlier—and therefore less mature or less desirable—levels of development on the other. Fixation and regression were both disparaging terms that described an undesirable condition in a person that required remediation. I wrote a paper criticizing the explanatory effectiveness of these concepts and pointed out the valuative connotations they embody (Ferguson, 1994). So far as I know, no one in the psychoanalytic community has ever responded to it.

Heterosexuality, being natural, was therefore seen by educators as something that should be promoted in schools. Again, a contradiction is immediately evident. If heterosexuality is such a natural outcome of human development, why do such pains need to be taken within the educational system to ensure that this “natural” outcome
occurs? Coeducation was invented to promote heterosexuality among children and ward off the “special friendships” that often developed among students in single-sex boarding schools. But note that all of this promotion of heterosexuality and pathologizing of homosexuality that occurred in the 20th century was a reaction to the specter of women migrating from traditional domestic roles into the male-dominated professions. Heterosexuality—for men as well as for women—helps keep women in their place, and it is a continuing conflict felt by heterosexual women down to the present day.

On the other hand, the social imperative of monogamous heterosexual marriage has been a much more profound cultural disaster for men and has led to a widespread persecution and criminalization of men on account of their sexual inclinations and has created a sexual culture pervaded by violence, intimidation, and fear. The closing of brothels and the disappearance of the brothel culture, coupled with the persecution of male homosexuality, has forced the sexual lives of men into these small prisons of monogamous marriages for which neither the vast majority of men nor women are suited, emotionally, sexually, or economically.

James Brundage has told us that Latin had at least 25 terms for what we call a “prostitute” (Brundage, 1987, p. 25). It indicates that this was a rich concept in Roman society with many gradations and distinctions, allowing for a wide variety of relationships between men and women. With the triumph of ascetic Christianity and coercive monogamous marriage, all of this was swept away and everyone was forced into a single one-size-fits-all mold for which the vast majority of people are not well suited.

The last 100 or more years of this social policy has given rise to a divorce culture that has had an inestimable deleterious impact on men, women, and especially children (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Domestic violence and child abuse have become so pervasive in the contemporary United States that the Center for Disease Control regards them as major public health problems (CDC 2010 Sexual Violence Report). American women are scared to death of men, and many are reluctant to walk on public streets for fear of harassment or assault. Many young people are shunning marriage and avoiding close interpersonal relationships altogether. All of the evidence of the last 100 or more years in the United States decisively indicates that monogamous heterosexual marriage as a social policy does not work. Although many couples in individual marriages do succeed, some even superbly well, they are a minority. Government policies promoting heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage have to be revised to right this ongoing animosity between the sexes and the breakdown in the personal lives of the majority of our people. The CDC 2010 Sexual Violence Report recommends:

Prevention efforts should start early by promoting healthy, respectful relationships in families by fostering healthy parent-child relationships and developing positive family dynamics and emotionally supportive environments. (Black et al., 2011, p. 4)

This is like attempting to cure a grave illness with a get well card. The CDC does not see its findings as raising a question against the character of heterosexual marriage itself. It fails to see that its own statistics clearly indicate that the institution of marriage is not working for a sizeable number of people. It constructs the problem as one of human failings or moral defect. It advocates a remedial approach of support and education on the one hand, with a punitive, coercive, reactive heavy hand on the other. “Accountability” it is called. The reason this will never succeed is that the problem is not simply that people are flawed and fail within themselves, but rather that this institution is set up to foster failure and yet everyone is pressured to enter into it or made to feel as though it is an appropriate social undertaking to legitimize their standing in society. The result is that people enter into marriages for which they are woefully
unprepared and whose expectations and demands are strongly stacked against them. The idea that people should just grow up and accept their responsibilities and take their place as adult members of society is not a serious solution to the problem.

**Heterosexual culture and homosexuality**

What is the relation between the growth of heterosexual culture and the persecution of homosexuality? The pathologization and persecution of homosexuality was an outgrowth of the more general suppression of sexuality that was impelled by the growth and spread of heterosexual culture. Once the Church made a grudging concession to heterosexuality in the very restricted form of monogamous marriage, then anything that stood outside of that one avenue of sexual tolerance was ripe for persecution, which it vigorously promoted. Even so, male homoeroticism, although condemned and outlawed, was not persecuted in earnest until late in the 19th century. Numerous sporadic, local persecutions are recorded, but sustained, systematic persecution that was widespread did not become possible until the advent of the modern state and modes of modern media that could promote propaganda to wide audiences.

Same-sex sexual relations have no justification other than human bonding and sexual pleasure. This is the key point. Gay people are singled out and labeled strictly on the basis of their sexual preference. What is a sexual preference? Sexual preference means that an individual favors some people as sexual partners more than others. It designates a *restriction* in the sources of sexual arousal and excitement that may serve as an impetus to stronger social bonding. Sexual preferences create sexual subgroups that can carry with them social implications beyond sexual bonding. If people could couple indiscriminately with any and all, preference would become meaningless. Christian ideology has no place for sexual preference. One has no business *preferring* any kind of sex at all. Christian thought *prefers* that people abstain from sex altogether. So people whose social identity is defined strictly by their sexual preference are an affront to an ascetic philosophy that devalues and suppresses any social expression of sexuality. Same-sex relations may be tolerated as long as they are deeply closeted and a hypocritical public posture is maintained. But a person who publicly acknowledges that he or she has sex with members of the same sex is acknowledging a proclivity for sex one of whose purposes is the satisfaction of lust.

Do you see the problem with this? If we tolerate one group of people who engage in sex outside of Church-ordained marriage for the satisfaction of their physical passion and lust, must we not then tolerate other non-married groups who wish to engage in sex from similar pleasurable motives? How can we draw a line? Why not sex for unmarried heterosexual people—what used to be called “fornication”? (A battle that has been pretty much lost in developed Western countries in this era of declining marriage.) What about sex with children? What about prostitution? What about polygamy, or concubinage? If we allow gay people to have their sexual inclinations publicly tolerated, we are opening up the floodgates to all manner of sexual expression in public and private life. This is the key danger as far as the Church is concerned. Gay liberation is the first beachhead toward a generalized heterosexual liberation, which is a much graver threat to the very existence of the Church as a dominant moral force in society. If heterosexuality is truly liberated—that is, freed from the tyranny of monogamous marriage—then Christianity as we know it is finished. This explains the intensity and fervor of the Christian groups that are seeking to suppress abortion, homosexuality, birth control, transgender equality,
pornography, children’s sexuality, and commercial sex. The Church knows it is fighting for its very survival and for its credibility as a moral authority. Once the tide turns decisively against the Church, it will become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant in society and in the lives of common people.

In his study of same-sex relations in premodern Europe, John Boswell noted,

From the fourteenth century on, Western Europe was gripped by a rabid and obsessive negative preoccupation with homosexuality as the most horrible of sins. The reasons for this have never been adequately explained. (Boswell, 1994, p. 262)

It is now possible to offer an explanation. The rise of heterosexual culture over the preceding two centuries precipitated a backlash from the governing regime of ascetics. It took the form of attempting to restrict all sexual expression to monogamous heterosexual marriages for the purpose of reproduction. Homosexuality was a salient dissent from this that had to be snuffed out. As I pointed out earlier, the deeper fear is the loosening of barriers against heterosexuality and the social ascendance of women. It should be kept in mind that there is no inherent opposition or antagonism between heterosexual and homosexual people. They are neither competitors nor antagonists. It is first and foremost paranoid ascetics who are the enemies of same-sex sexuality, just as they are opposed to nearly all sexuality in human life. The mobilization of governing institutions and coercive policing apparatuses to persecute it is sparked not by a proliferation of same-sex relationships and activity but, rather, by a reaction to a burgeoning, socially visible, heterosexual culture. It was true in the 14th century in Italy. It was true at the turn of the 20th century in the United States when brothels were being closed all over the country. It was true in the early 1950s during the McCarthy era at the height of the "Baby Boom." Percutation of homosexuality goes hand in hand with periods of heterosexual resurgence.

One of the arguments raised by religious people against the toleration of same-sex relations is that it threatens the family, at least the family as they understand it. In a sense they are right. The threat is not a direct one, but the implications of tolerating same-sex relationships are very grave indeed, because marriage as constructed by the Christian Church is the one legally sanctioned venue for sexual expression. Once exceptions start being carved out and legitimized, then this ultraconservative hegemony over sex in society starts to crumble.

Monogamy is the crucial linchpin in the problem with heterosexual marriage and the one most dear to religious people. The monogamous imperative was the impetus for the persecution of masturbation, premarital sex, homosexuality, the closing of brothels, the outlawing of commercial sex, and the banning of pornography. All of the malaise and conflict and antagonism in our sexual culture can be traced back to the attempt to narrow the sex lives of people down to one outlet, namely, their (heterosexual) marriage partner. While many monogamous couples are stable and exemplary citizens in a civilized state, the promotion of monogamy and the persecution of deviations from monogamy is crazy social policy, and the cultural history of the United States in the 20th century exposes that folly. Until we begin to question this tyrannical ideal that has been larded over us for eight centuries by Christian marriage, we will continue to experience this legacy of disillusionment, conflict, and violence.

The demise of heterosexual culture

The Baby Boom generation after World War II in the United States was probably the most perfervid heterosexual culture that can be found. The evidence for this is the
popular culture that it produced, in music, literature, movies, television, and pornography. It is overwhelmingly emphatic in its esteem of the heterosexual relationship—and, by implication, marriage—as the most worthy emotional and personal achievement available in life. Documenting this would be a vast undertaking, but having grown up in it, you can take my word.

However, all was not well in these Leave It to Beaver families of the 1950s and 1960s. In my estimation heterosexual culture peaked in the United States sometime around 1970 or a little after and has been in decline ever since. The evidence for this is the change in the music. Popular music today does not exalt heterosexual love as it did 40 or 50 years ago. It has lost the spirit of vigor and enthusiasm for human relatedness. Some of the titles in the Billboard Top 100 for the week of January 2, 2016 are: “Sorry”; “Love Yourself”; “Same Old Love”; “Used to Love You”; “Like I’m Gonna Lose You”; “Break Up in a Small Town”; “No Role Modelz”; “Me, Myself, and I”; “Drag Me Down”; and “Where Are You Now?” Nothing that expresses real enthusiasm for love, for getting involved, excitement about the prospect of marriage, or joy and optimism about a human relationship. That simplicity and naiveté and energetic good spirit that was so prominent in the 1950s and 1960s has largely disappeared from popular music and given way to a mood of cynicism, disappointment, ennui, and narcissism. Marriage is in decline. Families are in decline. Young people are postponing marriage and are not staying married. According to the U.S. Census Bureau,

- Sixty-six percent of households in 2012 were family households, down from 81 percent in 1970.
- Between 1970 and 2012, the share of households that were married couples with children under 18 halved from 40 percent to 20 percent.
- The proportion of one-person households increased by 10 percentage points between 1970 and 2012, from 17 percent to 27 percent.
- Between 1970 and 2012, the average number of people per household declined from 3.1 to 2.6. (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 1)

A recent survey in Japan found that 70% of unmarried men and 60% of unmarried women 18–34 years of age were not in a relationship, and nearly one half of them were not even looking for one (Aoki, 2016). Nearly one half of the people in this group admitted to being virgins, which represents a steep decline in sexual experience from previous surveys. Very significantly, I think, the study did not ask about same-sex partners. Although it is hard to make comparisons between Japanese society and the United States, it is a notable consistency in the decline in enthusiasm and expectations for man-woman relationships among young people in developed industrialized societies.

One might argue about the reasons for these trends, but the emotional and psychological impact that they have is to reduce expectations and hopes for interpersonal involvements with the opposite sex, and this is the essence of heterosexual culture. Notice also that over this same time period, gay people have made unprecedented strides in achieving social tolerance and recognition. We have by no means returned to a homosocial culture akin to the ancient world, but these broad trends support my contention that the ascendance of heterosexual culture and the persecution of homosexuality are related.

The reasons for the decline of heterosexual culture are numerous, and this topic deserves a much more extensive treatment. It is also worth noting that there is a lot of denial in our culture that this is even happening. From time to time one sees reports in the media that families are thriving and everything is going well. But we know better. Some of the factors influencing the decline of heterosexual culture are:
The inherent limitations of heterosexual relationships coupled with elevated expectations have resulted over generations in a vast pool of disappointed, disenchanted people who no longer buy the idealism and enthusiasm for heterosexual relationships, and particularly for heterosexual marriage.

The coupling of the monogamous imperative with the raised expectations for heterosexual relationships was a formula for disaster from the beginning, and that outcome has played out in American society over the last century and has created a culture of antagonism and violence between the sexes.

Changes in the economy, women’s health, and birth control have allowed women to enter the workforce in large numbers and also to move into traditionally male occupations. This has given women unprecedented economic and psychological independence from men and from their families that has enabled them to achieve a greater power balance in their relations with men, to avoid the sexual demands of men, to enforce the code of monogamy with their partners, or to avoid close relationships with men altogether. In short, women are less idealistic about close relations with men and less motivated to enter into them, and the inevitability of marriage and children for women is no longer a given.

The Invention of Heterosexual Culture is an excellent survey of these broad trends in Western culture over a span of nearly 1,000 years. Its value is in raising awareness of the scope of change that has occurred in philosophical outlook, legal manifestations, and the forms of artistic expression. The predominance of heterosexuality in the daily lives of most people is a profound fact of modern life, but its pervasiveness does not entail its antiquity, its continuity, or its longevity. The hegemony of heterosexuality is a cultural construct that has taken many years to evolve and establish itself. It is not in our genes, as you might have been led to think. It is continuing to evolve. Conservatives who are resistant to any change may call out its “naturalness” or its timelessness as a justification for suppressing any change or questioning of current institutions or legal structures that maintain this way of life, but they are illusions without any basis in history. This book does not provide an in-depth analysis of the economic, social, institutional, and political forces that powered these changes and allowed for the present status quo to emerge, but it is a forceful and significant start and an illumination of a subject that is worthy of much more extensive study.

References


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